

Thousands displaced by New Zealand floods

Tom Peters
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The extent of the devastation caused by unprecedented flooding in Auckland is becoming clearer. New Zealand's largest city experienced about three months' worth of rain on January 27 and more torrential rainfall in subsequent days. Dozens of suburbs were inundated, along with parts of the surrounding regions.

Four people lost their lives and hundreds suffered broken bones and other serious injuries. Between January 27 and February 2 some 287 people made claims to the state-owned Accident Compensation Corporation for injuries sustained in the floods, according to the *New Zealand Herald*.

On Sunday, Auckland Emergency Management's Rachel Kelleher said the recovery would take "many, many months if not years." More than 1,800 households have been displaced. As of yesterday there were 276 houses "red stickered" by inspectors as too unsafe to enter and 1,590 "yellow stickered" meaning only limited access is allowed. Thousands of vehicles have also been damaged or destroyed.

More than 20,000 flood-related insurance claims have reportedly been lodged, but this underestimates the scale of the disaster. According to global comparison website Finder, almost half of Auckland residents, 45 percent, do not have home insurance.

The already severe housing crisis is set to intensify. Across New Zealand, according to 2018 census data, 102,100 people—2 percent of the population—are homeless or living in overcrowded or unsafe conditions.

Stuff reported that community workers in the low-income suburb of Māngere have "found homes with 20 people living in them, as families were forced to move in with neighbours and relatives after their own homes were flooded."

A mother of three children, whose house was uninhabitable, told Radio NZ, "I worry about my kids'

health." She did not know when her family would have somewhere to live. "The council should be doing better, especially for emergency housing," she said.

Hundreds of volunteers are assisting with cleaning up neighbourhoods. Jana Hood, from the Student Volunteer Army, told Today FM on Monday: "I suspect we are actually going to have increasing numbers of people needing help as their current situation draws out." Health risks could force more people to abandon their homes, she said: "things are really starting to smell bad, pests are starting to get in and it's getting quite unsanitary."

Asked by RNZ on February 1 whether landlords should reduce rents on damaged properties, Auckland Property Investors Association president Kristin Sutherland said there were no rules around this and the Residential Tenancies Act "doesn't even have a definition of uninhabitable."

Sutherland added that the reduced supply in the rental market, while properties are being repaired, means "we may see some increased rents for that period of time." Asked whether this was fair, she replied that this was "the same in any market where there are supply and demand changes."

The interview sparked outrage on social media. One popular comment on Reddit said: "This almost strikes me as cartel behaviour; a call to action for landlords to collectively raise rents."

Another commenter called for the government to intervene, saying: "The class division in this country along property ownership lines is ridiculous—everyone should be entitled to affordable housing without getting shut out by ridiculous price increases or just shafted by parasitic landlords."

Several charities, student unions and other organisations have endorsed an open letter to the Labour Party-led government by advocacy group Renters United, calling for "a temporary freeze on rent

increases” in flood-affected areas. The Green Party, which is part of the government, called for a six-month rent freeze like one implemented at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Working people should have no illusions that any steps will be taken that would seriously impact the profits of property investors. Throughout the pandemic, the government has boosted the wealth of this layer and poured tens of billions of dollars into the banking system, pushing down interest rates and fuelling rampant speculation in property.

Now, in the face of soaring inflation, the Reserve Bank is seeking to engineer a recession, push up unemployment and drive down wages to further boost profits. The Auckland deluge comes at a time when the business elite is demanding austerity measures to make the working class pay for the economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic and the escalating US-NATO war with Russia over Ukraine.

The disaster is accelerating job cutting. Yesterday *Stuff* reported that JacksCo, a construction company with more than 100 workers, has gone into liquidation, with the extreme weather listed as a contributing factor alongside a slowdown in the industry.

Late last year Auckland Council announced plans to slash \$130 million from its 2023-24 budget. *Stuff* reported that the proposed cuts would “reduce or eliminate funding for arts centres and groups, either reduce or eliminate funding to local climate change initiatives” and reduce library opening hours.

The draft budget also calls for ending funding for the Citizens Advice Bureau, which has 32 offices across Auckland that provide free legal advice to more than 160,000 people a year.

Auckland mayor Wayne Brown has faced criticism in the media and from ordinary people over his delayed response to the flood on January 27. A petition calling for his resignation has more than 25,000 signatures.

Responsibility for the devastation in Auckland rests with successive councils and governments, led by both the Labour and National Parties. For decades the building sector has been deregulated and tens of thousands of properties have been built in flood plains, without sufficient drainage infrastructure.

The government estimates that the country’s water pipes and other infrastructure require an investment of between \$120 and \$180 billion over the next three

decades, which the *New Zealand Herald* noted is far more than the \$1.5 billion councils typically spend each year.

The *Herald* also reported that, according to a 2020 study, nearly 50,000 buildings nationwide are exposed to coastal flooding. That could rise to 120,000 due to global warming. These figures probably underestimate the scale of the problem. Sea level rise projections revealed last year “show that main centres like Auckland, Wellington, Napier, Marlborough and Nelson may be facing more than half a metre of rise by mid-century.”

Throughout the world, so-called “one in 100 year” extreme weather events are increasingly common due to climate change. Despite the threat to billions of people’s lives and livelihoods, capitalist governments, including the Labour-Greens government in New Zealand, are refusing to take the necessary action to reduce carbon emissions into the atmosphere, because this would require cutting into the profits of the world’s biggest polluting corporations.



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